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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000017

SIPDIS

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TAGS: CH KIRF PGOV PHUM PINS

SUBJECT: SHANGHAI AUTHORIZES EXPAT MORMONS TO HOLD WEEKLY RELIGIOUS SERVICES

REF: (A) 08 SHANGHAI 580, (B) 09 SHANGHAI 162, (C) 09 BEIJING 880, (D) 09 SHANGHAI 178

CLASSIFIED BY: Beatrice Camp, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General Shanghai, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Shanghai Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) has given expatriate members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) official permission to meet in Shanghai. Local observers point to the new decision to allow "temporary meeting places" for expatriate worshippers in Shanghai as a positive sign for other foreign non-official religious groups. However, there is no sign of similar approval being given to Chinese Mormon congregants. End Summary.

History of Expat Mormons in Shanghai

¶2. (SBU) The first formal weekly meetings of expatriate Mormon members in Shanghai were organized in 1988. A second Pudong Branch was formed later. Roughly 60% of the Shanghai congregation members are U.S. citizens and the remainder are third country nationals. Current Chinese law stipulates that foreign passport holders of any non-official religion must meet separately from PRC passport holders (Ref A), unless they are married to a foreign passport holder.

¶3. (C) A local expatriate Mormon leader estimated approximately 400 expatriate Mormons live in Shanghai and about 1,300 in all of mainland China. The number of Chinese members in mainland China is unknown; the Church website listed overall membership figures in Macau (1,300), Hong Kong (over 23,000), and Taiwan (over 49,000).

¶4. (SBU) For several years, Chinese and expatriate Mormon members in Shanghai held separate weekly Sunday meetings in the same location. Although the foreign Church members kept the Shanghai RAB informed of their meetings and their attendance numbers, permission to meet was never officially approved nor denied.

Expat Mormons Given Official Permission to Meet in Shanghai

¶ 15. (C) Despite the fact that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not one of China's five officially recognized religions (Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism - Ref B), the Shanghai Municipal Government has now given the expatriate Mormons official permission to hold weekly religious services in Shanghai. According to Shanghai RAB Foreign Affairs Division Director Wang Xinhua, this August 2009 authorization is the first official document issued in mainland China that gives expatriate members of a religious group not formally recognized by the Chinese Government permission to meet. (Comment: Embassy Beijing noted that a different expatriate group had been issued a similar permit in Beijing. End comment.)

¶ 16. (C) Reasons given for the change in policy ranged from Mormonism being a "mature" religion, to connections with international business corporations, to the size of the expatriate Mormon community in Shanghai. Wang Xinhua offered the "mature" explanation, adding that when other non-official religions become more "mature", local authorities will give similar approvals to their congregations in the foreign community. East China Normal University Professor Liu Zhongyu credited the change to Chinese President Hu Jintao's recent speeches encouraging a more liberal approach to religion in China. Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Religious Studies Director Yan Kejia speculated that the fact several leaders of Shanghai's foreign Mormon community work for multinational corporations influenced the Shanghai RAB's policy, while Fudan University Center for American Studies professor Edward Xu said the new policy had been applied to the Mormons because of their large numbers.

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¶ 17. (C) According to Mormon Shanghai International District President Stayner B. Lewis, negotiations with the Shanghai RAB about the expatriate Mormons' specific meeting place lasted several months. The RAB had two important requirements regarding any proposed meeting place: that it be "temporary" and "public". The Yongda International Tower (in eastern Shanghai) was agreed upon, where the Church rents space for their large group meetings, smaller classrooms, and offices.

¶ 18. (C) As a result of the negotiations, the Shanghai RAB gave the Mormons official authorization to meet at this building on a weekly basis, as well as to have 24-hour access, including issuing Church leaders keys for their offices. This quasi-recognition also ensures the "protection of the Shanghai Municipal Government, by way of safety and security", according to Lewis. There are now several guards, provided by the Yongda building, to ensure security and even provide "concierge" service, opening doors for the Church members as they enter and exit the building and providing audio tech support.

¶ 19. (C) However, this protection and service comes at a cost. Not only is the rent for this meeting space one of the highest per head in Asia for the Church, but in addition, a member of the Shanghai RAB attends and observes services every week, versus once a year previously. Additionally, Chinese Mormon members no longer can meet in the same location as the expatriate members. The Shanghai RAB also required several new security cameras and fire safety equipment to be installed, half of which had to be paid for by the Mormons.

Mormon Leaders Toeing the Line

¶ 10. (C) Lewis told CongenOff that he and the leadership of the expatriate Mormon community in Shanghai are ensuring that their congregations are following the Shanghai RAB's regulations, as well as the relevant Central Government rules. Church leaders remind their congregations weekly about the rules and regulations for practicing Mormons in Shanghai, most notably, the prohibition on proselytizing among PRC passport holders.

Lewis said that he not only wanted to toe the line, as the authorities have drawn it, but he wanted to stay well within it, so as to prove to the Shanghai RAB that the Mormons are trustworthy.

Comment: A Positive Trend?

¶11. (C) These recent changes in the Shanghai RAB's treatment of expatriate Mormon members shows a willingness of the Shanghai Municipal Government to improve cooperation with expatriate religious groups not officially recognized by the Chinese Government. Shanghai observers suggested this model can be expanded, both in Shanghai and elsewhere, but that it will depend on the resources of the RAB to manage additional religious groups (Ref C and D), especially as the new policy seems to require more RAB presence at services. In regards to Chinese congregants of all types, there is no indication that the rules will change any time soon to allow them to worship jointly with foreign co-religionists.

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